

Wednesday, July 6, 2011

Cruising: a retrospective after 20 months on a sailboat

At anchor in Puerto Rico Cruising on a boat for a few years is just like any other vacation, only longer. A series of enchanting beaches, bustling bars, charming hotels, absorbing museums, all interspersed with dauntless voyages across limitless oceans on your fast and spacious yacht. Before I left Germany on my 33ft steel boat, acquired second hand only four weeks before, I was sure of that. The pent-up lust for adventure from 20 years of writing software needed a vent. I had tried hiking and motorbiking but it wasn't enough, so sailing was going to be it. I romanticized what was to come and planned every step of it ahead in detail. Just like it was a two-week vacation, only longer. Nighttime sailing, slowly. I had planned ten months for an Atlantic circle, Germany to Germany via the French canals, Mediterranean, South Atlantic, Caribbean, and North Atlantic seas. Two months into the trip it became evident that it would not be enough time. After two more months I admitted it to myself. Now, 20 months later, the journey is far from over. In the meantime I have not only changed the boat, but also scope and direction of the voyage. I am not longer alone, three months ago my partner Liz joined me. The destination is no longer Germany, but New Zealand, her home. At the moment the boat is in Colombia, where it will stay for a few months until the unbearably hot summer with frequent storms and hurricanes is over and we will sail from the Caribbean into the Pacific. This break is an opportunity to look back and give an account of what I've done, experienced and learned. Working on the mast, again. Sint Maarten The statistics for what I've done are easy, because it's written in the ship's log and my blog. Out of the 600 days and nights I sailed 80. On 38 days I went diving, on 35 sightseeing, and the beach saw me 14 times. About 100 days I spent on my hobbies: writing, photography and videography. Interests that I had since my childhood, but which I had only explored on the surface and not in depth. The remaining 300+ days, 50% of the total time, I either worked on the boat or was searching for supplies and spare parts. At first I thought that I did something wrong, because surely sailing must be less work. But talking to other cruisers corrected that belief. Cruising means fixing your boat in exotic places, is the common proverb. But fortunately the numbers don't tell the whole story, because there is a lot to be learned, and fun to be had, even when not at sea but sweating upside-down in tight compartments. Caught by a thunderstorm, 300nm north of Colombia The days at sea were without doubt the most exciting and exhilarating, but at times also the most frightening and frustrating, days of my life. Besting fierce storms or navigating difficult passages sounded great when I dreamed about it from the comfort of my home. It didn't feel so great when I was deprived of sleep, wet, cold, hungry, and my safety depended on numb fingers and a few tired brain cells between my salt-covered ears. In those moments I thought to myself: only a fool would set out on a journey like this. But those moments also gave me insight into who I am. Understanding nurtured acceptance, and sometimes change. Some perceived and long-loathed character flaws weren't that bad, I realized. Other traits had to change and I started working on them. But still I was happy every time I made it safely into the next port or anchorage. Then, inevitably, my life unwound in a blur: from the exiting to the mundane. Nothing cleared the adrenalin of arrival from my bloodstream faster than patiently sitting in the harbor master's office to complete paperwork. After the following customs and immigration procedures, complete with bills, I was already tired of land-life, and I wished to cast off immediately and be free again. I only needed to finish some maintenance work first, fill my water tanks, and buy groceries. And, always, acquire spare parts to repair broken equipment or add needed components. Admittedly, some days were more productive than others. Now and then an old, or newly acquired, friend would show up to lend a hand. Or I would walk or dinghy over to assist them. Sometimes this helped tremendously with the work, and I could finish tasks that I had despaired of earlier on my own. At other times we only diminished the supplies of beer and chatted into the night. Philosophizing with Peter, Las Palmas If these days were not as exiting and character-building as the one's at sea, they were valuable in other ways. I acquired a wide range of knowledge about how sailboats and their components are built and maintained, along with a host of mechanical and other skills necessary to execute the tasks. Working in a foreign country with local people also opened up their culture and language for me. And the beers and stories I exchanged with other cruisers built strong friendships, based on shared values and an understanding of what drives the other. But on hearing some stories and vitas I could only stare in amazement at the naiveté, or sometimes stupidity, and wonder how the person even survived through the years and voyages. This put my own feats into perspective, and showed me that with the materials and technologies available since the 90s anybody could do what I had set out to do. And the market is overflowing with affordable sailboats. All it takes is the guts to try it and the willingness to put up with some inconveniences. Spanish lobster, Sint Maarten If I had succeeded in my plans to restore an old sailboat and cross the Atlantic Ocean on my own, I had failed in another thing miserably. Part of the idea behind sailing was to get away from the computer screen, which had so far arrested my attention for up to 80 hours a week. But the computer is an integral part of the cruiser's life, if only to plan passages and stay in touch with home. In addition I choose writing, photography and videography as my hobbies for the trip, which glued me to mouse and keyboard for many more hours. But I enjoyed it tremendously, and for a hobbyist I've made it to a respectable enough level, at least in photography. Unfortunately, all the adventuring and learning doesn't make the world a better place, and it can be argued that I wasted my time instead of doing something useful. Be it social, political, economical or

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environmental: belonging to something larger than a single personal life and contributing actively is important. I accept that, but I have no twinges of remorse. I knew from the beginning that I took some time off not only from work, but in a way from society. This trip was for myself and I would be the only one to lose or gain. One thing I gained unarguably was a lot of envy from my friends for the pictures I posted online. That people enjoyed my photography and videos made me very happy, and will continue to do so for a long time. It has become a true passion. But there are more noteworthy lessons and changes. Reasoning and acting myself out of difficult situations honed my out-of-the-box thinking and increased my confidence. Having to make the best out of unchangeable circumstances - e.g. the weather and bureaucracy - helped me to become more patient. And arranging myself with limited water, electricity, space, and amenities on the boat taught me to make do with less. The physical labor, sportive lifestyle and a balanced diet improved my health: I lost 16kg and have no more back- and wrist pains. All combined, the effect on my life is significant: healthier, happier, more patient, more confident, more agile, less needful. Liz and me, Havana. Many, maybe all, of these things I could have learned by staying home and continuing a regular life. Not in such a short time, and not working 80 hours a week, but maybe 40 or 50. Although it is highly unlikely that I would have. I am ambitious and competitive, and I lived in an environment that I had a lot of control over. With so much time, thought, and enthusiasm tied up with success in business I would have easily fallen behind in the self-improvement department. As it is, I feel that I have improved a lot and gained in many ways. For myself, and for my relationship. Last week I asked Liz, my partner in crime on the boat, if she wants to become my partner for life. She said yes. But on land. Which is fine with me. When we get to New Zealand I'll be happy to trade this adventurous but inconvenient life for more comfort and new challenges: a family of our own and a new business. After we get there. Between here and there, however, are the spectacular Panama Canal and the wide blue expanses of the Pacific Ocean - what an adventure!

Posted by Axel Busch in Gudrun V at 18:48

This is great news!

Congratulations to your engagement!

I wish the best of luck to both of you and will there always be six inches of water below your keel...

Cheers!

- Tassilo
Anonymous on Jul 6 2011, 20:43

Absolutely awesome my friend, and congratulations to you and Liz!
Anonymous on Jul 7 2011, 00:00

300 days working on the boats! I guess that's what comes with renovating two on the way, our numbers might look worse if we included the time before we left!

Fantastic news about you and Liz - not that I'd not been expecting it at some point :D, but many congratulations to both of you.
Anonymous on Jul 7 2011, 02:56

Wow!! Congratulations to you and Liz!! I'm really happy for you two and wish you all the best!!
Anonymous on Jul 7 2011, 13:03

Was soll ich jetzt da drauf schreiben?
Glückwunsch! Und weiterhin viel Glück und Erfolg!
Anonymous on Jul 7 2011, 14:48

How wonderful, that you left the uncomfortable comfort zone home to find yourself and happiness!

You guys are truly special, both of you! Congratz, big kisses and hugs!
Anonymous on Jul 7 2011, 21:51

sniff sniff, tear tear...i was hoping this would be the next step in your journey beautifully written, my friend. xx
Anonymous on Jul 8 2011, 03:53

what a great, beautiful retrospective.
No sugarcoated dreamings, just true and honest, straight out of your mind, "Axel pure" !
...and the happy end of the resume couldn't be better, THE highlight of the trip

All the best for Liz and you
Anonymous on Jul 11 2011, 04:14